

The Journal of Extension

Volume 52 | Number 2

Article 11

4-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Goble, C. L., & Miller, L. B. (2014). 4-H PetPALS Juvenile Diversion Program Supports At-Risk Youth and Seniors. *The Journal of Extension*, 52(2), Article 11. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol52/iss2/11>

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4-H PetPALS Juvenile Diversion Program Supports At-Risk Youth and Seniors

Abstract

The 4-H PetPALS Juvenile Diversion Program provides a partnership opportunity with Extension and the juvenile court system to positively impact lives of at-risk youth. At-risk youth are taught by 4-H PetPALS adult volunteer leaders and 4-H PetPALS members to value and respect the human-animal bond, as well as to understand and empathize with senior adults who require skilled nursing care. At-risk youth interact with youth exhibiting positive behaviors, pets that are predictable and inspire confidence in whom they visit, and senior citizens who crave interaction with young people, making a rewarding experience for everyone involved in this program.

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Introduction

The 4-H PetPALS (People and Animals Linking Successfully) Juvenile Diversion Program in Pike County, Ohio, is an animal-assisted activities program where at-risk youth and appropriately trained companion animals visit senior adults living in comprehensive healthcare facilities. This program is designed to address critical needs of youth, ages 10-18, who are in situations placing them at risk for negative behaviors. More than 60 at-risk youth completed this program, learning how to interact with animals and senior citizens. The goal of the 4-H PetPALS Juvenile Diversion Program is to reduce negative behaviors in at-risk youth and to integrate them into their respective communities as capable, compassionate, and contributing citizens, without becoming repeat offenders.

Approach

The 4-H PetPALS Juvenile Diversion Program is operated in partnership with the Pike County Juvenile Court jurisdiction, Ohio State University Extension 4-H Youth Development, and Pleasant Hill Manor, a comprehensive healthcare facility. The healthcare facility's activities director provides protocol and guidance for 4-H PetPALS visits. The 4-H Extension educator provides overall leadership and initiates contact with the partners. Prior to establishing the 4-H PetPALS Juvenile Diversion Program, a partnership already existed with the court system through the 4-H CARTEENS traffic safety program.

The juvenile judge mandates that first-offender youth with delinquencies and misdemeanors attend this program as their "sentence." The judge meets with each first-offender and one parent or guardian on an individual basis to discuss the procedure the youth must follow to complete the requirements of his or her sentence. This partnership with the Juvenile Court System allows for increased 4-H participation of youth from high-risk environments (Hobbs, 1999).

For 10 weeks, at-risk youth attend weekly 2-hour sessions to learn about 4-H PetPALS and to interact with typical youth who model positive behaviors. Youth learn how to work humanely with pets and engage in sensitivity training to become more empathic of senior adults. Upon completion of the training, supervised youth visit residents at Pleasant Hill Manor once a week for 4 weeks.

4-H PetPALS

The 4-H PetPALS project (Miller & Suthers-McCabe, 2002) was selected as the vehicle to help youth with at-risk behaviors integrate into their communities. By taking this project, youth learn skills needed to visit senior adults with their pets. Companion animals offer one of the most accessible enhancements to a person's quality of life (Hart, 2006). They can provide companionship, nonjudgmental affection, and unconditional support. Studies show that youth who have pets display enhanced self-esteem and empathy (Becker, 2002; Melson, 2002). At-risk youth build positive coping behaviors when allowed supervised interaction with animals (Weigel, Caiola, & Pittman-Foy, 2002). Pets serve as a means for people to start conversations and interact.

4-H PetPALS adult leaders and members provide appropriate pets for this program. Prior to participating, 4-H PetPALS leaders complete a 6-hour workshop to learn how to implement the 4-H PetPALS curriculum. 4-H members complete lessons and activities in the curriculum to prepare to visit healthcare facilities. They learn how to interact with residents, as well as activities they can do during visits. Employees of the juvenile court system provide information on working with at-risk youth as a part of the volunteer and member training.

Adult leaders and youth members serve as mentors for the at-risk youth. Establishing positive adult/youth relationships through mentoring can improve the quality of life for at-risk youth (Riggs, Lee, Marshall, Serfustini, & Bunnell, 2006). These youth learn how the animals provided communicate and behave, requirements for these pets to visit people, and how to properly and safely interact with the animals. They learn each specific pet's body postures, stress indicators, and calming signals. Youth learn the importance of human-animal interactions and the value of the human-animal bond by spending each training session with the animals to which they are respectively assigned.

Visiting Senior Adults

Once youth have formed a relationship with their assigned pets and have completed aging and medical conditions sensitivity training, they, their pets, and adult supervisors visit the skilled nursing residents, along with the 4-H PetPALS leaders and members. The pets serve as conversational icebreakers to help youth interact with residents. They give youth support and confidence to talk with residents.

Skilled nursing residents typically are very excited for youth-pet teams to visit. The only human contact some residents have is with their caregivers. The young peoples' smiling faces and enthusiasm, accompanied by furry companions, are welcomed (Thomas, 1996).

Residents treat all of the youth equally, which provides a welcoming environment and sense of belonging for the at-risk youth. As a result of visiting with residents, at-risk youth notice the emotions and physical disabilities of others and how their presence can make someone's day more meaningful. This leads to these youth having more patience with and becoming more empathic toward the senior population. The at-risk youth also become more aware of their emotions and how these emotions play a part in the way they cope on a daily basis.

Replication

Extension professionals interested in replicating this program should take the following steps.

- Develop a partnership with their respective juvenile court systems.
- Offer the 4-H PetPALS curriculum to 4-H volunteers and youth to establish 4-H PetPALS groups or contact volunteers from a local pet therapy group who might be interested in working with at-risk youth.
- Contact a local healthcare facility administrator to discuss the 4-H PetPALS Juvenile Diversion Program.
- Develop a timeline for implementing the program once all partners are in agreement and funding sources are secured.

The authors received the majority of funding from the court system, supplemented by grants secured by the Extension educator.

Conclusion

The ultimate outcome for the 4-H PetPALS Juvenile Diversion Program is for high-risk juveniles to integrate into the community as positive, contributing, and productive citizens. This can be accomplished as a result of being more empathic toward people, and learning to cope with stress and daily life occurrences. Through animal handling and care, sensitivity training, and animal-assisted activities visits, youth develop positive coping behaviors and become more empathic toward others, improving their likelihood of success when integrating into their communities.

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